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ABSTRACT

This study explored the social world of one school, looked at the web of relationships, and documented the social interactions that occurred in the context of a mandated reform. The study was designed to describe and understand the relationships of teachers in one school as they planned and developed a school-wide strategy for change as required by the school's participation in the Title I program. Economic conditions were declining in this suburban district, and many students from multi-family housing, many of whom qualified for free lunch, were added to the school's attendance zone as a result of redistricting. Eight of the school's 30-member faculty did not participate in the study. Data were collected through observation of faculty planning meetings and individual and focus group interviews. Sociograms were created to describe some teacher interactions. Data revealed groupings of "we" and "they" among teachers. The "we's" were involved in decision making, but they perceived the "they's" to have the power. The existence of one group actually strengthened the other. This research shows the importance of bridge members of the faculty who serve to bring the two groups together sufficiently to accomplish the tasks of school reform. (Contains two figures.) (SLD)

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Understanding Teacher Relationships During A Mandated Reform

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In 1932, Willard Waller began his classic book, The Sociology of Teaching, with the following statement:

> What this book tells is what every teacher knows, that the world of school is a social world. Those human beings who live together in the school, though deeply severed in one sense, nevertheless spin a tangled web of interrelationships; that web and the people in it make up the social world of the school. For let no one be deceived, the important things that happen in schools result from the interaction of personalities. (p. 1)

Waller (1932) believed that the social interactions of the school participants are a powerful and important lens through which to view the school organization. Evident in Waller's now classic study of teaching is the message that understanding the "concrete realities" of schools is understanding the "tangled web" of social relationships among those who inhabit them. Waller carefully mapped out the web of influence and interactions. More recently, Sarason (1995) has reminded reformers that teacher relationships are complex, fundamentally important, and yet sadly unexplored. Now, more than fifty years after Waller's study, this research responds to Sarason and explores the social world of one school, looking again at the webs of relationships, and documenting the social interactions that occur in the context of reform efforts.

Teachers desire social relationships (Little & McLaughlin, 1993; Siskin & Little, 1995; Waller, 1932; Wideen, 1994), but the physical arrangement and impersonal school settings frustrate their ability to socialize. The setting encourages the formation of smaller and more intimate webs or subgroups of colleagues with whom teachers share specific interests, ideologies, or other attributes. Currently, the literature presents two extreme and dissimilar visions of the

social environment of schools. The first is the normative model of the school with what Huberman (1993) describes as the "vision of the schoolhouse as a bonded community" (p. 11). This vision is championed in the effective schools and restructuring literature and characterized by shared goals and collaborative norms. This is an ideal, and as Little (1990) observes, such ideal coherence is rare.

In the second vision offered in the literature, researchers suggest with great lament that schools display what Hargreaves (1991) calls "fragmented individualism" (p. 93). These disassociated environments are characterized as "egg crate" or "cellular" (Lortie, 1975, p. 77) or as places where teachers are engaged in "parallel piecework" (Johnson, 1990b; Metz, 1990). Huberman (1993) describes teachers as "independent artisans." They "work alone, learn alone, and ...derive their most important professional satisfactions alone" (pp.22-23).

Siskin (1995) studied a group of teachers that rejected both the "bonded community" and the "fragmented individual" visions of schools. The alternative vision found in his study he refers to as "micro-communities--the smaller social worlds of 'subgroups' within schools" (p. 29). These subgroups form because teachers can't interact with everyone, but need to interact with someone. To find the reasons behind these associations and subgroups and using Siskin's data set, Talbert (1995) studied the small clusters of colleagues who interacted frequently and maintained close consequential ties in the school. He found that some teachers maintain relationships that originate in their beginning years of teaching; other subgroups result from shared pedagogy or philosophy; still others are self-selected groups that develop around some commonality such as teaching assignment, a shared lunch period, ancillary staff role, or even

smoking. Siskin (1995) maintains that these assemblies provide for the "webs of interrelationships" that teachers need (p. 30).

Little and McLaughlin (1993) warn that the incidence, location, and boundaries of collegial interaction should not be taken for granted. They have discovered that few studies take into account all of the ways in which groups in schools are constituted or of the manner in which "group-ness" or "we-ness" (p. 4) provides a template for interaction and thus an important lens through which to view a school's culture or cultures.

This study investigates teacher relationships that may be important to a reform effort. It uses a framework of the following concepts: teacher relationships can be understood through attention to the webs of interaction between and among teachers (Sarason, 1995; Waller, 1932) and to how they talk about their social world (Hargreaves, 1996); the way in which teachers talk and interact around a variety of topics, specifically around the reform effort, creates subgroups or coalitions that convert to power in the school (Ball, 1987; Blase, 1987a); this power is used by teachers to get what they want or to keep what they have (Blase, 1991); these interactions and their underlying relationships are influenced by institutional factors and influence any institutional activity, particularly any change efforts (Weiss, 1995).

Context of the Study

This study was designed to describe and understand the relationships of teachers in one school as they plan and develop a school wide strategy for change as mandated by the school's participation in the Title 1 program. This school's eligibility for Title 1 is the result of declining economic conditions in the aging suburban district as well as redistricting that increased the number of students from multi-family housing neighborhoods in this school's attendance zone.

More students qualified for the free lunch program and, as a result, the school met eligibility requirements for participation in Title 1 for the first time in the 1993-1994 school year. During the 1993-1994 year, Title 1 operated as it had in the very bureaucratic district for twenty years. Based on program evaluations and a district-wide needs assessment, the personnel and activities supported by federal funds were determined at the central office; compliance and documentation were emphasized. However, at the end of the 1994-1995 school year, in expectation of changes in regulation resulting from Congressional reauthorization of the program, the district with the support of the state Title 1 office, implemented important changes in the procedures for the expenditure of local school funding and allowing more local school discretion.

With the reauthorization, the focus of Title 1 would increase pressure for school accountability for student progress. This propelled other modifications in how the program was implemented including increased resources, flexibility in program activities, greater emphasis on professional development, and, most importantly, greater school autonomy in decision-making about program, staff, and budget. The research site implemented its modified district plan in the 1995-1996 school year and, during that year, entered into the planning phase for the school wide plan. It was a confusing time for the staff, particularly in light of the previous emphasis on procedural compliance. The new law had been passed but was still ambiguous since the federal regulations had not been issued. It was clear, however, that there had to be a school planning team for the Title 1 program; a support team made up of people from outside the school had to be created; and the faculty had to be involved in the decisions about the program.

Methodology

Participants in the study included the school planning team appointed by the principal, the principal, the external consultant who was a member of the support team, and members of the faculty who were willing. Eight members of the thirty-member faculty did not participate. Data were collected from the participants through observations of team meetings, faculty meetings, and staff development sessions; through both individual and focus group interviews throughout the year of the study; and through a social network analysis questionnaire conducted early in the year. Interview data were transcribed and coded for themes and were used interactively with sociograms drawn from the social network data to challenge and support hypotheses. The sociograms were produced using UCINET IV Network Analysis Software. Observation notes from faculty and team meetings helped the researchers to understand what they were seeing and hearing from the participants.

Results of the Study

Figure 1 provides the sociogram that resulted from the question: Name two teachers who talk like you do about teaching. It illustrates many of the relationships that were supported and enlarged upon in the interviews; it also illustrates where relationships were not evident. One grouping in the faculty is made up of isolates in reference to this question and others. Of the eight teachers that did not participate in either the social analysis network questionnaire or in the interviews, four were not chosen by any of the participants in the network analysis and the other four were chosen by only one person, usually someone who share a teaching assignment. Several of these isolates were talking about retirement; two of the four African-American teachers on the faculty and one of the two males on the faculty were non-participants.

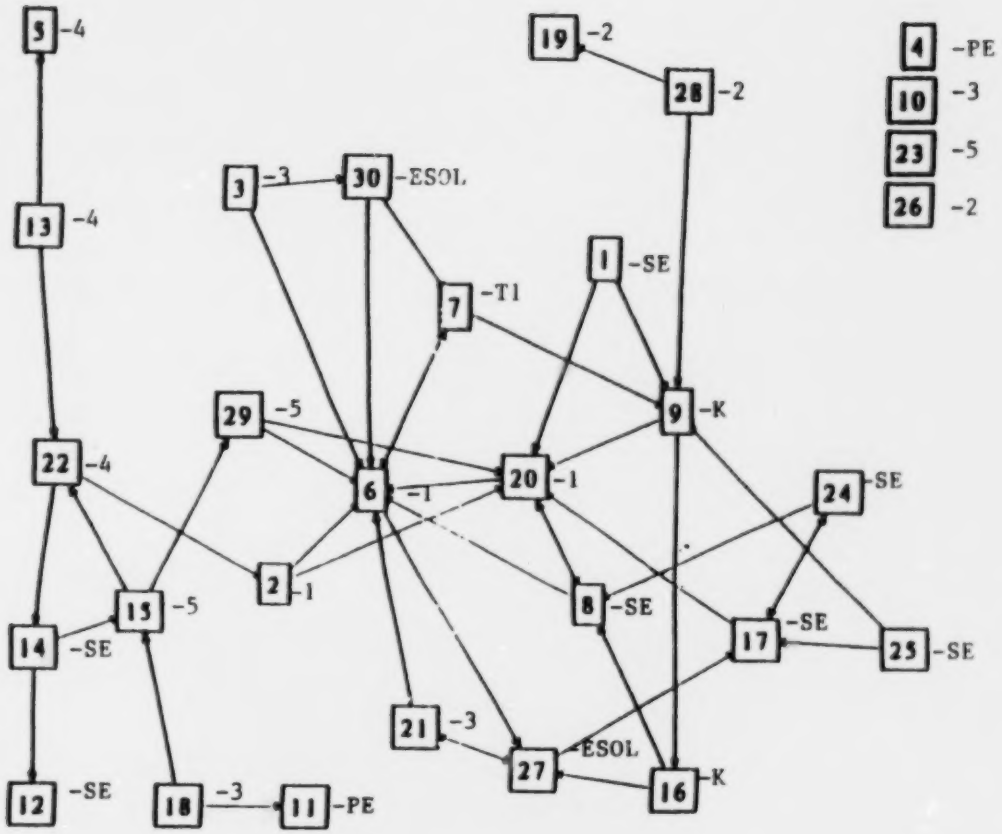

Figure 1. Sociogram. Question: Name two teachers who talk like you do about teaching.

Figure 1 also permits the study of philosophical relationships that may be based on the opportunity to talk. Webs of relationships did occur among grade level groups which in this school also are groupings of people with classrooms in the same halls. While this sociogram as well as others produced in the study demonstrated weak grade level groupings, there were few reciprocal relationships explaining the lack of cohesion and group loyalty (Dimock, 1987) that was evident in all the data.

Of the planning group (#6, 7, 8, 13, 21, & 30), teacher #6 is the most articulate member, and it is clear that she speaks for many teachers when she talks about teaching. All but one of the planning team chose her, but some of the other faculty also chose her (# 2, 3, & 27). There are others among the faculty who speak for the faculty (# 8, 9, 17, & 20). These people were chosen by members of the planning team and also by other members of the faculty who, for the most part, did not choose planning team members.

Observations of the planning group at work provided an hypothesis that they did not perceive themselves to be speaking for the faculty as a whole. They perceived the faculty to be made up of two groups. They identified themselves as "we" and the rest of the faculty as "they." The team perceived the atmosphere in the school to be tense, and they were aware of and in some cases, had had direct experience with negative comments about them from other faculty members. The external consultant discussed their feelings:

> I had a chance to work with the planning group as they went through the planning process--getting frustrated, getting scared, worrying about the rest of the faculty's perception of what they were doing and worrying if they were going to be able to get the task done and meet the deadline.

Out of these feelings, the group constructed the "we" group to which they belonged and the "they" group that represented at least at first the rest of the faculty. The "wes" attributed philosophical differences and characteristics to the two groups:

> It disturbs me that they lack the desire to do more professional development types of things. We have to continue to update our knowledge and skills by going to conferences and reading journals. Some of it takes place after school and on Saturday and they want no part of it. Sometimes it costs your money and they will not do it. They will not do what it takes to change.

Another teacher on the planning group described the "they" group:

> The "they" group doesn't even want to know what it (the Title I plan) is. They say, just leave me alone to do my own thing.

About the planning group, one member said:

> The "we" group is interested in moving forward as individual teachers and as a school. We embrace this opportunity of funds to do some things to help kids. We recognize that we are not alone anymore. We used to do innovative things separate and apart and were usually alone. Now, it is as though we've been validated. We are going where we're supposed to be going. School wide planning encourages the kind of professional growth and development and trying innovative things that we've been doing all along. It has provided a forum for people to talk and realize they are not alone--peer collaboration and grade level planning are helping.

Follow-up interviews based on the sociogram revealed that the two-group description of the faculty framed by the planning group was too simplistic. Additional probes supported the

identification of a third group--the bridge group. The bridge group emerged as teachers who supported the reform effort but, in all but one case, were either not asked or had not been willing to participate on the formal planning team. The bridges were not willing to ignore their relationships with the "they" group. In response to the question: Who talks like you do about teaching?, members of the bridge group were chosen by both both subgroups (See Figure 1). The member of the planning group (#8) and three others (# 9, 17, 20) approached their positions in various ways. One teacher explained:

> One reason I keep myself isolated is because I don't want to be a part of the "wes" or the "theys." I really don't want to get caught in the middle of the pull and tug, because, yes, there is definitely a tug between groups of people here. It is very difficult to be within that whether you choose to be in it or were accidentally pulled in as I once was. It was just because I was too naive to know that this was going on around me and never again will I have that happen to me. So I stand back. I don't participate. There is just no point in being in a fight.

A second member of this bridge group spoke of her dilemma:

> ...I am in one of the most hostile groups and I'm also participating on the team. Well, this hasn't hurt me because I have taken flack from them for a lot of things, and you keep feeling like you are getting the flack for all of this bull that is going on. These are your old friends from outside and some are part of your social circle. For some, it is their personality to resist and complain, and you can either do what was done in the past and feed off of it or you can back up from it. And as you back up from it, you just get more flack, and you are nowhere. I'm nowhere! I'm in between groups, and it is a strange place

to be. I'm in between two groups. I talk to everyone on the faculty, I loan stuff out, and I've got an open door policy.

Another teacher recognized the bridges on the faculty and added:

> Sometimes the bridge group makes waves. They just don't leave the "they" group alone--they talk to them and try to generate interest.

This comment led to an important hypotheses and support came from the interview transcripts and meeting notes. A further definition of the bridge group occurred as it became clear that not all of the teachers chosen by both groups talked the language of inclusion. One bridge teacher acknowledges the two groups, but instead of pledging allegiance to one group or the other, recognizes the good in both:

> ... I have worked very hard at making sure that I can get along with both groups. I think this is something that people have to work at and I have chosen this route. I want to be able to go to this group and feel as though, you know, I'm OK with this group and OK with the other group. You don't let yourself get too close to either group. You just kind of try to go along in the middle and really be diplomatic about it. You have to really work at it.

The bridges are recognized by others on the faculty. One faculty member commented:

> The bridge group says by their actions, come join the group, in a non-threatening way. They talk about the good things that are available and the opportunities the project has created. They seek out others and invite them to be a part. They tend to be optimistic people who are not discouraged by the naysayers. They say, "Let's try it; if it doesn't work, we'll try it a different way, but we won't know if we don't try.

The relationships that this faculty has with the principal, how members of the faculty use these relationships, and how they perceive others use relationships are a telling aspect of the culture in this school. Figure 2 provides a sociogram drawn based on responses to the question: Name two teachers who have a similar rapport with the principal. There are only two reciprocal relationships among the faculty, and both those include #17, a bridge who is one of the few teachers chosen by more than one teacher. One could speculate that each member of the faculty perceives each other member of the faculty to have a unique relationship with the principal. That was certainly evident in the interviews and in the faculty meetings.

In interviews, one teacher made the following explanation:

> ...I have been here for many years and a perception that has long been held on this faculty for those many years is that there are powerful people on this faculty that make the decisions and it isn't always the principal. The perception is that there are teachers who want to get their way and they know how to walk into the office and get their way.

Another teacher described how it happened on one occasion:

> I witnessed one teacher go into the office about one of the Title 1 workshops we were supposed to attend and say 'I see I'm down for this workshop and I'm not going to it.' And the answer the principal gave her was, 'Well, okay.'

One member of the planning group spoke about the power of the teachers they perceived to be in the "they" group:

> They are adamant and they make themselves heard. They come right out and make demands. They are forceful and let it be known what they want to do or, more often,

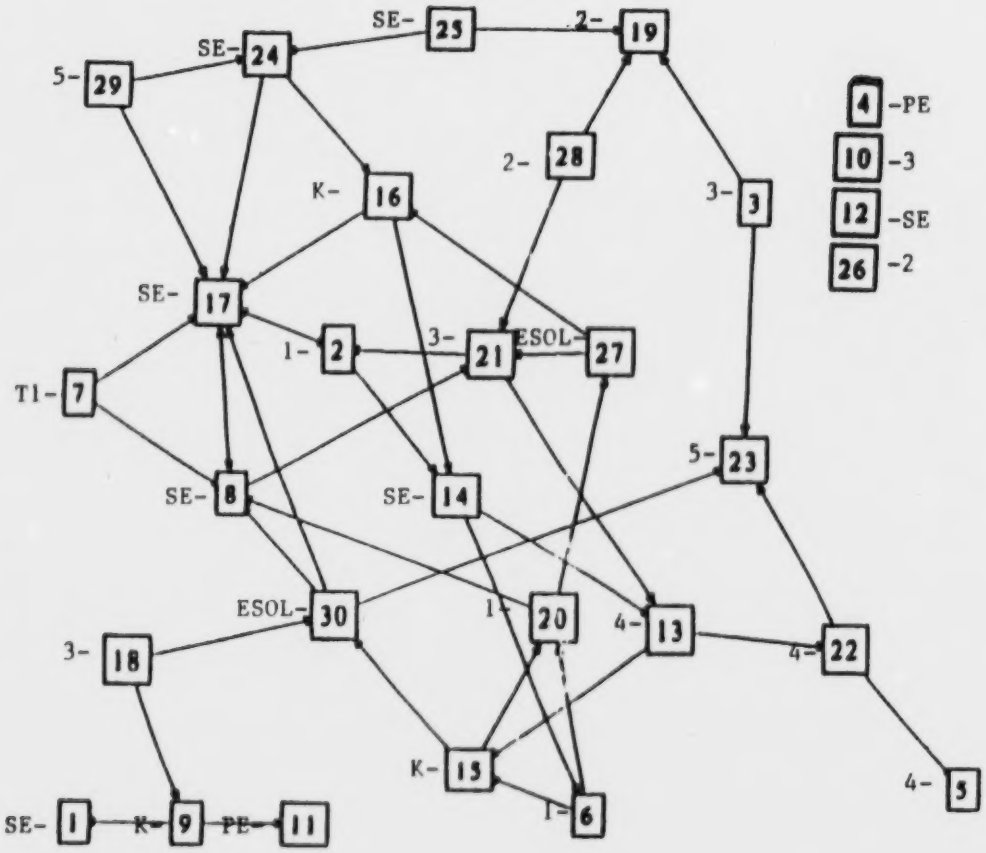

Figure 2. Sociogram. Question: Name two teachers who have a similar rapport with the principal.

don't want to do. It's an individual thing to get what they want. They go one-on-one with the principal.

Another teacher comments:

> If they want something, they initiate it or create an atmosphere to pressure people. They use the policy book so they won't have to do something. They don't do it; they won't do it.

One member of the planning team explained the situation to a new teacher:

> We are the 'could we please' people. The power people don't say please. You are sitting with the people who have no power.

Other teachers commented on power distribution among the faculty as it pertains to influence with the principal:

> The "we" group gets what they want through relationships through peer collaboration and support. They reinforce one another. They are interested in change and sometimes get what they want by going along--you know--by playing the game. They do what the principal wants so they can get what they want.

Still another teacher explains:

> The "we" group works together. They get what they want by going to the principal as a group. Not as forceful--more as a suggested thing.

The groups defined here are not stable. Although the data to this point is sparse, it would seem that reduced isolation could affect groupings as well as power. During the planning year, the faculty met together in various combinations beyond grade level/room location and were provided with many opportunities to talk about their school and what they cared about. One of

the bridge teachers was added to the planning group; and at the meeting at which the whole faculty voted on the plan options prepared by the planning team, the team was not attacked and it was not clear that the votes had divided by "wes" and "theys." By the end of the year, the lines among the "we" group and the "they" group were beginning to fade and the number of people talking to both groups increased. One teacher explained:

> When you have a chance to share with someone you have always been isolated from, you can say to them--I had no idea that was your philosophy or that you thought that way.

Discussion

The groupings of "wes" and "theys" found in this study have some referents in the literature. Hargreaves and Macmillan (1994) found subgroups that referred to as the "ins" and the "not ins." The "ins" were perceived to have influence that affected decision-making in the school; the "not-ins" were perceived to be powerless. In this study, the "wes" were involved in decision-making, but they perceived the "theys" to have power. Their fears that things would go wrong were voiced from the beginning meetings. These fears were heightened by changes in guidelines and ambiguity in procedures. Their major fear centered around presenting the school wide plan options to the whole faculty and what the "they" group would say and do.

Weiss (1995) asserts that almost all political scientists take for granted that self-interest is the core of organizational politics (for example, Halperin, 1974). The "they" group acted to secure their individual interests. They were viewed as forceful and resourceful, as well as demanding and determined. Their use of the school system and union policies and the principal to serve their interests is translated into "they" power by the "we" group. This perceived power

translates into a feeling of powerlessness for the "wes" and "bridges." In effect, they were perceived to have veto power on the reform effort.

Smith and Berg (1987) help us understand that power is an attribute of the relationship between groups, rather than of any group itself. They explain that power may ensue from a group's sense of powerlessness. If a group feels powerless, they may relate to another group as though the second group is powerful. This dynamic gives the second group power, not because it was powerful, but because the powerless group provided it with power.

A contradiction arises here. On the one hand, the "we" group feared the power they attributed to the "they"group, but on the other hand, the very construction of the"they" gave the "wes" power. The existence of "theyness" strengthened "weness." Group cohesion is strongest when a perceived hostile group exists. Smith and Berg cite Sarason's 1972 work where he maintains that the creation of a new group suggests an indictment of the setting in which the new group forms, the implication is that the new group believes that it can devise something better. The very creation of the new group produces the probability of conflictual relationships.

"Bridge" people would seem to provide a positive dynamic in such a conflictual situation. Groups have to work on two forms of integration (Smith & Berg, 1987). A group must not only understand how to bring how to bring its members together so that it can act as a unified whole, it also must develop ways of integrating itself with other groups. This research would support attention to the role of the "bridge" members of the faculty in efforts to strengthen the ability of faculties to open themselves to the possibilities of mutual interest in school reform and would lead us to believe that opportunities for faculty members to talk together will be very important in that process.